

Eden Historic Landscape Project Report No.1

Prehistoric Earthworks at Brackenthwaite

A mysterious bank underlies the existing field system at Brackenthwaite Farm near Appleby. What was it for and where does it lead? These were the questions that led members of the group to investigate the area on a windy day last summer.

Brackenthwaite Farm

Brackenthwaite means "clearing with bracken" in Old Scandinavian. However, apart from the bracken, there is little evidence for Scandinavian occupation. The earliest map showing the farm in its present form dates to 1848 and illustrates a field system little changed from today. Brackenthwaite is also mentioned in the Inclosure Award of 1774 though there is no clear record of field boundaries relating to that time.

Beneath the present field system is an earthen bank. In places the stone walls run on top of it but immediately behind Brackenthwaite farm the bank runs diagonally across the present field system. It is preserved to a better extent in some fields than in others where it was clearly considered a nuisance by farmers in the past. In two fields the bank has been ploughed out and barely survives as a mark in the pasture. In others it has survived well and can be seen clearly as a linear bank flanked by two ditches, one on each side.

Field Survey

The aim of the survey was to record the extent of the earthwork and plot its position on an OS map. We were able to show that the bank survives in some form for approximately two and a half kilometers. The map below shows the extent of the bank which runs from Kiesley Beck at one end, to

a point marked D on the map close to Murton Beck (The dashed line at C marks the area of the bank which has been largely destroyed. B marks the position of Brackenthwaite Farm).

The bank is constructed from boulder clay and stands 110cm high

in places and is 330cm wide at its base. The ditches have filled up over time and are visible only in a few locations along its length. The bank has been severely eroded and has been cut through in recent times to provide access to the present fields. In one small field at Shepherds Cottage the bank was completely demolished so that no trace of it survived. Caused, it seems, by the owner keeping pigs in the field.

At point D the bank came to an end and no further trace of it could be found. However at this point, where the bank meets the Murton beck, there is a high bank on the far side of the stream. It appears that the natural landscape was used as a continuation of the earthwork, forming an effective boundary along the beck side. This natural bank continues along the beck until it meets Swine Gill. This stream runs below Castle Hill settlement where it meets up with Kiesley Beck, close to where the earthwork bank begins. Could these natural stream banks form the other side of a large enclosure?

Prehistoric Settlement

Castle Hill settlement (NY702230) is a fine example of a defended farmstead of the Iron Age or Romano-British period, perhaps some 2,000 years old or more. The stone foundations of circular huts are

clearly visible as are the substantial banks and ditch enclosing the site (A). It occupies a prominent location on a spur of land above Flakebridge wood and would once have commanded a clear view of the land below. The area outlined by the earth bank would have been clearly visible from this vantage point. In the absence of other evidence it seems likely that the bank is associated with this settlement.

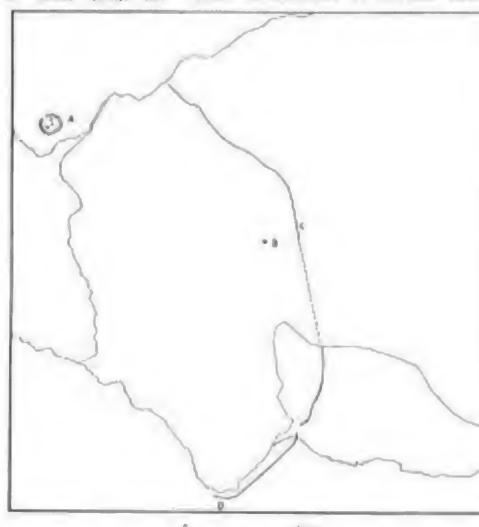
Similar systems are known elsewhere in the Eden Valley where these earth banks are known as 'dykes'. At Watby and Crosby Garrett linear banks have been identified up to five kilometers long associated with rectilinear field systems and unenclosed settlements dated to the Roman period. There is also evidence for the use of a number of steeply banked streams as natural boundaries which supplement the constructed dyke system. In some areas the combination of natural and constructed boundary features allows us to construct a complete picture of prehistoric land use including settlements, small fields and large scale enclosures.

Conclusions

It seems likely that at Brackenthwaite we can identify a similar system to those identified at Watby and Crosby Garrett with a large area having been enclosed by the prehistoric inhabitants of Castle hill settlement. We have identified half of the enclosure as an earth bank and it is feasible that the other half was bounded by the high sided stream banks that delineate a large area within view of the settlement. Although we have not dated the bank, by association with the settlement it is either late Iron Age or Romano-British in origin.

Purpose

The dyke could have been purely a territorial boundary delineating the area under the control of the settlement. Equally it could form part of the agricultural landscape of these prehistoric farmers. The bank may have enclosed an area of pasture used for grazing stock in the winter. It would serve not only to keep animals safe within the enclosure, but could feasibly have been used to keep them out during the summer months, allowing the land to recover for the next winter's grazing.



Map of Castle Hill settlement and Brackenthwaite Dyke